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**Important Dates**

- April 17, 2007:** Field Advisory, 4:00-4:50
- April 18-21, 2007:** CEC Conference
- April 9-13, 2007:** AERA Conference
- May 13-17, 2007:** IRA Annual Conference
- May 15, 2007:** Advisory Board Meeting, 4:30-6:00
- July 15, 2007:** Application Due for Spring 2008

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**Learning To Teach Reading Comprehension**

The shift from pre-service to in-service teacher is complex, as is the shift from general educator to special educator. To learn how literacy teacher educators approach this, we interviewed three special education instructors (Michele Kessler, Donna Polelle, and Maria Stetter.) We focused our interviews on how these educators help their students learn to teach reading comprehension. Ultimately, to them thinking like a teacher means having both internalized and reflected on the processes and strategies associated with reading comprehension as well as the ability to explain them to pupils in classrooms.

Donna Polelle says it is vital for her students to realize that reading comprehension "is the ultimate result and final goal in all reading" so that "everything else we teach (phonics, vocabulary, fluency) culminates in helping children comprehend what they're reading." Similarly, Maria Stetter believes that pre-service teachers must remember to actively teach reading comprehension strategies. By this she means "things [that] good readers do before, during, and after reading in order to understand the text." Michele Kessler concurs, saying "the most important thing for students (college age) to learn about teaching reading comprehension is that research supports strategy-based instruction as the most effective way to teach reading comprehension." In addition to various strategies, she adds that it is important for educators to show students which strategy works best with each type of reading (e.g., newspaper, novel, journal article, book) so that they can be prepared for reading in any situation.

The organization and structure of the university courses helps students learn this. Polelle's course is structured so that reading

comprehension is understood as both a process and a product of education. She comments that approaching comprehension as "a hierarchy of skills" reinforces the significance of each aspect while also putting them into perspective as mutually interdependent factors of comprehension. Students in Polelle's and Stetter's courses are required to demonstrate their own comprehension of strategies through in-class presentations that demonstrate their understanding of foundational theories as well as their skill at incorporating hands on tools such as graphic organizers. Stetter hopes this allows her students to see the kind of organization required of educators in all fields but especially in special education. Kessler also requires her students to give in-class demonstrations of comprehension strategies. By relying on the same tools that their future pupils will one day use, teacher educators work to enable future teachers to identify advantages and challenges associated with different tools and strategies.

As with all students, immediately applying what has been learned is vital for retention as well as comprehension. For students learning how to teach it is absolutely necessary. Stetter stresses "ultimately, they've got to make it their own" and there is no better way than asking them to make their own lesson using at least some of the strategies learned in courses. Kessler comments that this method "gives them a chance to begin to develop their own teaching style based on the strategies that they feel work best for them and how they view teaching and learning." For this reason all the instructors we spoke with include assignments in which students design and demonstrate a lesson that incorporates one or more of the comprehension strategies discussed in class. When this is finished students

are invited to talk about their thought process in designing the lesson and to engage in discussion and critique with one another.

Since students in teacher education classes are often a mix of those who have never taught along with experienced educators, such discussions provide time for students with less experience to learn from those with more as well as for the experienced teachers to think about something that they may not have considered. Polelle, Stetter, and Kessler all agree that this collaborative activity is an essential element of pedagogy in teacher training.

With the diverse levels of experience in a teacher education classroom it can be difficult for instructors to negotiate how much attention or feedback to give each student, especially since some experienced teachers come to class thinking they already know how to teach. Despite this, Polelle feels that "everyone brings something to the class and because of this great diversity everyone can learn something from someone else." Stetter also enjoys the interactive exchanges of thoughts and experiences in her classroom. The distinction she raises between the two types of students is that experienced teachers have "a particular question they are coming with...with those people you want to find out their central question and address [it]" whereas instructing inexperienced or pre-service teachers is more about giving them "hands-on tools". Kessler agrees with Polelle and Stetter although she reminds us that "although we know that strategy instruction is the best way to teach reading comprehension we, educators, are still not doing enough of it in our classrooms."

## What Makes a Good Partnership?

We interviewed school-based teacher educators who serve as partners and mentors to university teacher candidates. Many of their comments echoed the importance of practice (through demonstration and discussion) of the reasoning behind planning and teaching comprehension strategies. In their work with mentees they stress the necessity of helping them consider what they believe students need to know and how they might, as teachers, implement practices to get those strategies across. More than a chance to talk about particular learning strategies or teaching practices, the mentors saw their work as an opportunity for collaborative consideration of how teachers need to approach student's learning experience before, during, and after a lesson.

Nicole Davis is a special education teacher at Lane Tech High School. She begins a mentoring relationship by gaining a sense of where a student wants to go in their career as well as what they expect from her. When working with student teachers or during mentor/student meetings she tends to be very positive about what has been done well and constructive about what needs improvement. She says "I try to provide enough room for them to grow through their mistakes and not give them all the answers...because I myself don't know all the answers". She insists that she has as much to learn from her mentees as they have to learn from her. Seeing these encounters as an opportunity for sharing and growth, Davis tries to portray teaching realistically, admitting that it can be quite difficult but equally rewarding.

Special educator Cheryl Janusz teaches at Boone Elementary in Chicago and agrees that mentor/student relationships should be honest, cooperative, and productive. She commented that while she introduces new ideas to student teachers, they regularly provide new ideas or techniques that she goes on to use in her classroom. As a relatively new teacher (working for 9 years) she remembers the pressure and stress that new teachers often feel when confronted with groups of students or in-class observation. Despite these pressures or the results of a particular lesson Janusz tells her mentees that there is always something to learn from a lesson whether it goes well or poorly. Her general advice to students is that "having a solid, well-planned lesson that he/she is familiar with allows [you] to focus less on the mechanics of the lesson, and more on building those all-important classroom management skills." She views this point as the foundation of her role as a mentor. Her view is that classroom management skills cannot be taught but rather only learned through experience—and so she helps her mentees figure out what strategies work best for them.

Janusz and Davis agree that mental and practical preparation and familiarity with material is crucial for all special educators, particularly those new to the field. They believe that it is not the role of mentors to tell their students what to do or how to do it but rather to explore the strategies and approaches the teacher candidates bring to the table. Discussing those approaches and techniques in light of their extensive experience in the classroom helps both student and mentor consider what might work best or worst for them. In this way the onis and opportunity for growth and improvement is available to our students and mentors.

## Research Corner

Brown, Tammie; Katz, Laura, Hargrave, Sharon; & Hill, Roberta. (2003). *Promoting Quality Teachers through a Supportive Mentoring Environment for Pre-Service and First-Year Teachers*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED480857

Brown *et al* argue that the quality of a partnership depends on the willingness of each teacher candidate to incorporate his/her mentors' ideas as well as the degree of flexibility in the resources and advice offered by each mentor. The idea expressed by the mentors we interviewed, that each mentor-student relationship is unique, is echoed by these authors. Even if a student is eager to learn from his/her mentor, the mentor must be sure that his/her input is tailored to the needs and interests of each teacher candidate. A mentor must not think of themselves as a gatekeeper of teaching methods or learning strategies, but as an equal participant engaged in a dynamic and ever-changing relationship with her or her mentee.

## Digital Corner

**Ripple Effects Teaching Coach** allows teachers to act as their own mentors as they customize the program to their specific classroom environment and teaching goals, and then use it to monitor their own progress towards those goals as well as their students progress. This comprehensive program addresses four areas that are critical to teacher success: learning issues, behavior issues, socio-cultural issues, and social-emotional issues. It provides a scaleable way to quickly enable educators to tease out one from the other, and efficiently address each with a combination of technical skill and emotional intelligence. A series of interactive profiles enable teachers to identify individual *student* issues and aptitudes, in areas like ADHD, dyslexia, and learning styles. Another set of profiles help *teachers* better understand themselves in areas critical to success. Equipped with this information on individual students, and on themselves, teachers can then get coaching in how to work with individual students most effectively.

[www.rippleeffects.com/education/software/teachers.html](http://www.rippleeffects.com/education/software/teachers.html)